Russian Short Stories

Mechanical Justice

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Mechanical Justice by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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The large hall of the principal club of one of our provincial towns was packed with people. Every box, every seat in pit and stalls was taken, and in spite of the excitement the public was so attentive and quiet that, when the lecturer stopped to take a mouthful of water, everyone could hear a solitary belated fly buzzing at one of the windows.

Amongst the bright dresses of the ladies, white and pink and blue, amongst their bare shoulders and gentle faces shone smart uniforms, dress coats, and golden epaulettes in plenty.

The lecturer, who was clad in the uniform of the Department of Education—a tall man whose yellow face seemed to be made up of a black beard only and glimmering black spectacles—stood at the front of the platform resting his hand on a table.

But the attentive eyes of the audience were directed, not so much on him as on a strange, high, massive-looking contrivance which stood beside him, a grey pyramid covered with canvas, broad at its base, pointed at the top.

Having quenched his thirst, the lecturer went on:

“Let me briefly sum up. What do we see, ladies and gentlemen?

We see that the encouraging system of marks, prizes, distinctions, leads to jealousy, pride and dissatisfaction. Pedagogic suggestion fails at last through repetition. Standing culprits in the corner, on the form, under the clock, making them kneel, is often quite ineffectual as an example, and the victim is sometimes the object of mirth. Shutting in a cell is positively harmful, quite apart from the fact that it uses up the pupil's time without profit. Forced work, on the other hand, robs the work of its true value. Punishment by hunger affects the brain injuriously. The stopping of holidays causes malice in the mind of pupils, and often evokes the dissatisfaction of parents. What remains? Expulsion of the dull or mischievous child from the school—as advised in Holy Writ—the cutting off of the offending member lest, through him, the whole body of the school be infected. Yes, alas! such a measure is, I admit, inevitable on certain occasions now, as inevitable as is capital punishment, I regret to say, even in the best of states. But before resorting to this last irreparable means, let us see what else there may be.…"

"And flogging!" cried a deep bass voice from the front row of the stalls. It was the governor of the town fortress, a deaf old man, under whose chair a pug-dog growled angrily and hoarsely. The governor was a familiar figure about town with his stick, ear trumpet, and old panting pug-dog.

The lecturer bowed, showing his teeth pleasantly.

"I did not intend to express myself as shortly and precisely, but in essence his Excellency has guessed my thought. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, there is one good old Russian method of which

we have not yet spoken—corporal punishment. Yes, corporal punishment is part and parcel of the very soul of the great Russian people, of its mighty national sense, its patriotism and deep faith in Providence. Even the apostle said: 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.' The unforgotten monument of medieval culture—Domostroi—enjoins the same with paternal firmness. Let us call to mind our inspired Tsar-educator, Peter the Great, with his famous cudgel. Let us call to mind the speech of our immortal Pushkin:

"'Our fathers, the further back you go,

The more the cudgels they used up.'

"Finally, let us call to mind our wonderful Gogol, who put into the mouth of a simple, unlearned serving-man the words: 'The peasant must be beaten, for the peasant is being spoiled.' Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I boldly affirm that punishment with rods upon the body goes like a red thread throughout the whole immense course of Russian history, and takes its rise from the very depths of primitive Russian life.

"Thus delving in thought into the past, ladies and gentlemen, I appear a conservative, yet I go forward with outstretched hands to meet the most liberal of humanitarians. I freely allow, loudly confess, that corporal punishment, in the way in which it has been practised until now, has much in it that is insulting for the person being chastised as well as humiliating for the person chastising. The personal confrontment of the two men inevitably awakens hate, fear, irritation, revengefulness, contempt, and what is more, a competitive stubbornness in the repetition of crime and punishment. So you no doubt imagine

that I renounce corporal punishment. Yes, I do renounce it, though only to introduce it anew, replacing man by a machine. After the labours, thoughts and experiments of many years, I have at last worked out a scheme of mechanical justice, and have realised it in a machine. Whether I have been successful or not I shall in a minute leave this most respected audience to judge."

The lecturer nodded towards the wings of the stage. A fine-looking attendant came forward and took off the canvas cover from the strange object standing at the footlights. To the eyes of those present, the bright gleaming machine was rather like an automatic weighing-machine, though it was obviously more complex and was much larger. There was a murmur of astonishment among the audience in the hall.

The lecturer extended his hand, and pointed to the apparatus.

"There is my offspring," said he in an agitated voice. "There is an apparatus which may fairly be called the instrument of mechanical justice. The construction is uncommonly simple, and in price it would be within the reach of even a modest village school. Pray consider its construction. In the first place you remark the horizontal platform on springs, and the wooden platform leading to it. On the platform is placed a narrow chair, the back of which has also a powerful spring and is covered with soft leather. Under the chair, as you see, is a system of crescent-shaped levers turning on a hinge. Proportionately with the pressure on the springs of the chair and platform these levers, departing from their equipoise, describe half circles, and close in pairs at a height of from five

to eighteen *vershoks* above the level of the chair—varying with the force of pressure. Behind the chair rises a vertical cast-iron pillar, with a cross bar. Within the pillar is contained a powerful mechanism resembling that of a watch, having a 160 lb. balance and a spiral spring. On the side of the column observe a little door, that is for cleaning or mending the mechanism. This door has only two keys, and I ask you to note, ladies and gentlemen, that these keys are kept, one by the chief district inspector of mechanical flogging machines, and the other by the head master of the school. So this apparatus, once brought into action, cannot be stopped until it has completed the punishment intended—except, of course, in the eventuality of its being forcibly broken, which is a hardly likely possibility seeing the simplicity and solidity of every part of the machine.

“The watch mechanism, once set going, communicates with a little horizontally-placed axle. The axle has eight sockets in which may be mounted eight long supple bamboo or metal rods. When worn out these can be replaced by new ones. It must be explained also that, by a regulation of the axle, the force of the strokes may be varied.

“And so we see the axle in motion, and moving with it the eight rods. Each rod goes downward perfectly freely, but coming upward again it meets with an obstacle—the crossbeam—and meeting it, bends and is at tension from its point, bulges to a half-circle, and then, breaking free, deals the blow. Then, since the position of the crossbeam can be adjusted, raised or lowered, it will be evident that the tension of the bending rods can be increased or decreased, and the blow given with a

greater or less degree of severity. In that way it has been possible to make a scale of severity of punishment from 0 degrees to 24 degrees. No. 0 is when the crossbeam is at its highest point, and is only employed when the punishment bears a merely nominal, or shall I say, symbolical, character. By the time we come to No. 6, a certain amount of pain has become noticeable. We indicate a maximum for use in elementary schools, that would be up to No. 10; in secondary schools up to 15. For soldiers, village prisons, and students, the limit is set at 20 degrees, and, finally, for houses of correction and workmen on strike, the maximum figure, namely, 24.

“There, ladies and gentlemen, is the substance of my invention. There remain the details. That handle at the side, like the handle of a barrel organ, serves to wind up the spiral spring of the mechanism. The arrow here in this slot regulates the celerity of the strokes. At the height of the pillar, in a little glass case, is a mechanical meter or indicator. This enables one to check the accuracy of the working of the machine, and is also useful for statistical and revisionary purposes. In view of this latter purpose, the indicator is constructed to show a maximum total of 60,000 strokes. Finally, ladies and gentlemen, please to observe something in the nature of an urn at the foot of the pillar. Into this are thrown metal coupons with numbers on them, and this momentarily sets the whole machine in action. The coupons are of various weights and sizes. The smallest is about the size of a silver penny, and effects the minimum punishment—five strokes. The largest is about the size of a hundred-copeck bit—a rouble—and effects a

punishment of just one hundred strokes. By using various combinations of metal coupons you can effect a punishment of any number of strokes in a multiple of five, from five to three hundred and fifty. But"—and here the lecturer smiled modestly—"but we should not consider that we had completely solved our problem if it were necessary to stop at that limited figure.

"I will ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to note the figure at which the indicator at present stands, and that which it reaches after the punishment has been effected. What is more, the respected public will observe that, up to the moment when the coupons are thrown into the urn, there is no danger whatever in standing on the platform.

"And so … the indicator shows 2,900. Consequently, having thrown in all the coupons, the pointer will show, at the end of the execution … 3,250. … I fancy I make no mistake!

"And it will be quite sufficient to throw into the urn anything round, of whatever size, and the machine will go on to infinity, if you will, or, if not to infinity, to 780 or 800, at which point the spring would have run down and the machine need re-winding. What I had in view in using these small coupons was that they might commonly be replaced by coins, and each mechanical self-flogger has a comparative table of the stroke values of copper, silver and gold money. Observe the table here at the side of the main pillar.

"It seems I have finished. … There remain just a few particulars concerning the construction of the revolving platform, the swinging chair, and the crescent-shaped levers. But as it is a

trifle complicated, I will ask the respected public to watch the machine in action, and I shall now have the honour to give a demonstration.

“The whole procedure of punishment consists in the following. First of all, having thoroughly sifted and got to the bottom of the motives of the crime, we fix the extent of the punishment, that is, the number of strokes, the celerity with which they shall be given, and the force and, in some cases, the material of the rods. Then we send a note to the man in charge of the machine, or communicate with him by telephone. He puts the machine in readiness and then goes away. Observe, the man goes, the machine remains alone, the impartial, unwavering, calm and just machine.

“In a minute I shall come to the experiment. Instead of a human offender we have, on this occasion, a leather mannequin. In order to show the machine at its best we will imagine that we have before us a criminal of the most stubborn type. ‘Officer!’” cried the lecturer to someone behind the scenes. “‘Prepare the machine, force 24, minimum celerity.’”

In a tense silence the audience watched the attendant wind the handle, push down the crossbeam, turn round the celerity arrow, and then disappear behind the scenes again.

“Now all is in order,” the lecturer went on, “and the room in which the flogging machine stands is quite empty. There only remains to call up the man who is to be punished, explain to him the extent of his guilt and the degree of his punishment, and he himself—remark, ladies and gentlemen, himself!—takes from the box the corresponding coupon. Of course, it might be

arranged that he, there and then, drops the coupon through a slot in the table and lets it fall into the urn; that is a mere detail.

“From that moment the offender is entirely in the hands of the machine. He goes to the dressing-room, he opens the door, stands on the platform, throws the coupon or coupons into the urn, and … done! The door shuts mechanically after him, and cannot be reopened. He may stand a moment, hesitating, on the brink, but in the end he simply must throw the coupons in. For, ladies and gentlemen”—exclaimed the pedagogue with a triumphant laugh—“for the machine is so constructed that the longer he hesitates the greater becomes the punishment, the number of strokes increasing in a ratio of from five to thirty per minute according to the weight of the person hesitating. … However, once the offender is off, he is caught by the machine at three points, neck, waist and feet, and the chair holds him. All this is accomplished literally in one moment. The next moment sounds the first stroke, and nothing can stop the action of the machine, nor weaken the blows, nor increase or diminish the celerity, until that moment when justice has been accomplished. It would be physically impossible, not having the key.

“Officer! Bring in the mannequin!

“Will the esteemed audience kindly indicate the number of the strokes. … Just a number, please … three figures if you wish, but not more than 350. Please. …”

“Five hundred,” shouted the governor of the fortress.

"*Reff*," barked the dog under his chair.

"Five hundred is too many," gently objected the lecturer, "but to go as far as we can towards meeting his Excellency's wish let us say 350. We throw into the urn all the coupons."

Whilst he was speaking, the attendant brought in under his arm a monstrous-looking leathern mannequin, and stood it on the floor, holding it up from behind. There was something suggestive and ridiculous in the crooked legs, outstretched arms, and forward-hanging head of this leathern dummy.

Standing on the platform of the machine, the lecturer continued:

"Ladies and gentlemen, one last word. I do not doubt that my mechanical self-flogger will be most widely used. Slowly but surely it will find its way into all schools, colleges and seminaries. It will be introduced in the army and navy, in the village, in military and civil prisons, in police stations and for fire-brigades, and in all truly Russian families.

"The coupons are inevitably replaced by coins, and in that way not only is the cost of the machine redeemed, but a fund is commenced which can be used for charitable and educative ends. Our eternal financial troubles will pass, for, by the aid of this machine, the peasant will be forced to pay his taxes. Sin will disappear, crime, laziness, slovenliness, and in their stead will flourish industry, temperance, sobriety and thrift.

"It is difficult to probe further the possible future of this machine. Did Gutenberg foresee the contribution which book-printing was going to make to the history of human progress

when he made his first naive wooden printing-press? But I am, however, far from airing a foolish self-conceit in your eyes, ladies and gentlemen. The bare idea belongs to me. In the practical details of the invention I have received most material help from Mr. N——, the teacher of physics in the Fourth Secondary School of this town, and from Mr. X——, the well-known engineer. I take the opportunity of acknowledging my indebtedness."

The hall thundered with applause. Two men in the front of the stalls stood up timidly and awkwardly, and bowed to the public.

"For me personally," continued the lecturer, "there has been the greatest satisfaction to consider the good I was doing my beloved fatherland. Here, ladies and gentlemen, is a token which I have lately received from the governor and nobility of Kursk—with the motto: *Similia similibus*."

He detached from its chain and held aloft an immense antique chronometer, about half a pound in weight. From the watch dangled also a massive gold medal.

"I have finished, ladies and gentlemen," added the lecturer in a low and solemn voice, bowing as he spoke.

But the applause had not died down before there happened something incredible, appalling. The chronometer suddenly slipped from the raised hand of the pedagogue, and fell with a metallic clash right into the urn.

At once the machine began to hum and click. The platform inverted, and the lecturer was suddenly hoist with his own

petard. His coattails waved in the air; there was a sudden thwack and a wild cry.

2,901, indicated the mechanical reckoner.

It is difficult to describe rapidly and definitely what happened in the meeting. For a few seconds everyone was turned to stone. In the general silence sounded only the cries of the victim, the whistling of the rods, and the clicking of the counting machine. Then suddenly everyone rushed up on to the stage.

“For the love of the Lord!” cried the unfortunate man, “for the love of the Lord!”

But it was impossible to help him. The valorous physics teacher put out a hand to catch one of the rods as they came, but drew it back at once, and the blood on his fingers was visible to all. No efforts could raise the crossbeam.

“The key! Quick, the key!” cried the pedagogue. “In my trouser pocket.”

The devoted attendant dashed in to search his pockets, with difficulty avoiding blows from the machine. But the key was not to be found.

2,950, 2,951, 2,952, 2,953, clicked the counting machine.

“Oh, your honour!” cried the attendant through his tears. “Let me take your trousers off. They are quite new, and they will be ruined. … Ladies can turn the other way.”

“Go to blazes, idiot! *Oey, o, o!* … Gentlemen, for God’s sake! … *Oey, oey!* … I forgot. … The keys are in my overcoat. … *Oey!*

Quickly!”

They ran to the anteroom for his overcoat. But neither was there any key there. Evidently the inventor had left it at home. Someone was sent to fetch it. A gentleman present offered his carriage.

And the sharp blows registered themselves every second with mathematical precision; the pedagogue shouted; the counting machine went indifferently on.

3,180, 3,181, 3,182. …

One of the garrison lieutenants drew his sword and began to hack at the apparatus, but after the fifth blow there remained only the hilt, and a jumping splinter hit the president of the Zemstvo. Most dreadful of all was the fact that it was impossible to guess to what point the flogging would go on. The chronometer was proving itself weighty. The man sent for the key still did not return, and the counter, having long since passed the figure previously indicated by the inventor, went on placidly.

3,999, 4,000, 4,001.

The pedagogue jumped no longer. He just lay with gaping mouth and protruding eyes, and only twitched convulsively.

At last, the governor of the fortress, boiling with indignation, roared out to the accompaniment of the barking of his dog:

“Madness! Debauch! Unheard of! Order up the fire-brigade!”

This idea was the wisest. The governor of the town was an enthusiast for the fire-brigade, and had smartened the firemen

to a rare pitch. In less than five minutes, and at that moment when the indicator showed stroke No. 4,550, the brave young fellows of the fire-brigade broke on the scene with choppers and hooks.

The magnificent mechanical self-flogger was destroyed for ever and ever. With the machine perished also the idea. As regards the inventor, it should be said that, after a considerable time of feeling sore in a corporal way and of nervous weakness, he returned to his occupation. But the fatal occasion completely changed his character. He became for the rest of his life a calm, sweet, melancholy man, and though he taught Latin and Greek he was a favourite with the schoolboys.

He has never returned to his invention.